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SUBJECT: SYRIA: 2007 COUNTRY REPORTS ON TERRORISM

REF: STATE 146856

¶1. (SBU) Russell Comeau is the Embassy POC. Address: 6110 Damascus Place, Dulles, VA 20189. Unclassified e-mail: ComeauR@State.gov. Tel: (963-11) 3391-3785.

¶2. (SBU) Syria was designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1979. Since then it has continued political support to Palestinian terrorist groups, and political and material support to Hizballah since the group's creation. HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), among others, all base their external leadership in Damascus and operate within Syria's borders. The Syrian government insists that the Damascus-based groups are confined to political and informational activities, but Palestinian groups with leaders in Syria have claimed responsibility for anti-Israeli terrorist attacks.

¶3. (SBU) Over the course of the year, Syria's public support for the Palestinian groups varied, depending on Syrian national interest and international pressure. As in 2006, President Bashar al-Asad expressed public support for Palestinian rejectionist groups. Hamas Politburo head Khalid Mish'al and his deputies continued to reside in Syria and the Syrian government facilitated their movements by providing security escorts for their motorcades. Additionally, Mish'al led Friday prayers at various mosques throughout Syria and gave several public speeches expressing gratitude for Syria's support. At times, however, the Syrian regime claimed to have utilized its influence to restrain the rhetoric and activities of Palestinian groups. In advance of the November 2007 Annapolis Conference, for example, the Syrian government postponed a Palestinian rejectionist conference organized by Hamas, PFLP-GC, and PIJ to occur in November in Damascus.

¶4. (SBU) Syrian officials publicly condemned some acts of international terrorism, including bombing attacks that killed Lebanese members of parliament. At the same time, the Syrian regime made a distinction between what it considered to be legitimate armed resistance by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, by Lebanese Hizballah, and by Iraqi opponents of the "occupation of Iraq." The Syrian government has not been implicated directly in an act of terrorism since 1986, although an ongoing UN investigation into the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri continued to investigate Syrian involvement. Separately, four Syrian members of Fatah al-Islam were arrested in connection with the February 13, 2007 Ain Alaq bus bombings in Lebanon. Syrian Interior Minister Maj. Gen. Bassam Abdul Majeed spoke publicly in

March 2007 on the matter and rejected suggestions that the Syrian regime was involved in the attack.

¶5. (SBU) Syria continued to strengthen ties with Iran, another state sponsor of terrorism. Iranian President Ahmadinejad, accompanied by the Iranian Defense Minister and the Iranian Army Chief of Staff, met with Syrian President al-Asad and other senior Syrian officials in July 2007. During this visit, Ahmadinejad also met with Palestinian rejectionist groups, including two separate meetings with the leaders of Hamas and PIJ and a collective meeting with leaders of PFLP, PFLP-GC, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and Fatah al-Intifada. Additionally, local media reported that Hizballah leader Nasrallah met with Ahmadinejad at the Iranian Embassy in Damascus. According to open source reporting, Syria and Iran worked successfully to rearm Hizballah after the July-August 2006 War between Lebanon and Israel.

¶6. (SBU) Although the Syrian government suspended intelligence cooperation with the U.S. and several foreign governments in 2004, over the last 12 months Damascus took action against al-Qaida and other terrorist groups and individuals. Additionally, the Syrian government worked to increase security cooperation with Iraq during the course of the year. In July 2007, Syria hosted a meeting of technical border security experts representing Iraq's neighbors, the U.S., and other countries. Syria also participated in two ministerial-level Iraq Neighbors' Conferences in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt (May 2007) and Istanbul (November 2007).

¶7. (SBU) The Syrian government refused to implement mandatory visa requirements for citizens of Arab countries but claims

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to have increased its scrutiny of military aged Arab males. In August 2007, Syria hosted Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki and signed several security-related agreements. As of year's end, Syrian and Iraqi officials had held several ministerial and working level meetings focused on enhanced economic and security cooperation. According to U.S. and Iraqi officials, 2007 witnessed a marked reduction in the flow of foreign terrorists transiting through Syria into Iraq. On December 2, 2007 Lieutenant General Odierno, Commanding General, Multinational Corps - Iraq, noted publicly there had been a 25 to 30 percent reduction in the number of foreign fighters entering Iraq from Syria.

¶8. (SBU) Despite acknowledged reductions in foreign fighter flows, the scope of the problem remained large. Syria continued to allow former Iraqi regime elements to operate in the country. According to the December 2007 "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq" report to Congress, nearly 90 percent of all foreign terrorists known in Iraq used Syria as an entry point. While the Syrian government has taken some steps to intercede in foreign fighter movements through the country, the Syrian government can do more to wrap-up known terror networks and foreign fighter facilitators operating within their borders. Separately, the Syrian government has cracked down on pro-PKK (Kongra Gel) sympathizers in northeastern Syria, and President al-Asad expressed his public support of Turkish military action against Kongra Gel militants operating in southern Turkey and northern Iraq.

¶9. (SBU) Syria remains a source of concern regarding terrorist financing. The Commercial Bank of Syria remains subject to U.S. sanctions. Industry experts report that 70 percent of all business transactions are conducted in cash and only eight percent of all Syrians use formal banking services. Syria's black market money-changers continue to operate unabated and regional "hawali" networks are intertwined with smuggling and trade-based money laundering - facilitated by notoriously corrupt customs and immigration officials, raising significant concerns that the Syrian government officials and Syrian business elite are, at the very least, complicit in black market and/or terror financing

schemes.

¶10. (SBU) Syria's government-controlled press continued to tout Syrian regime efforts to combat terrorism; the media reported in March 2007 that the Syrian security forces had arrested a Sayidda Zeinab based fundamentalist for supporting terrorist attacks in the region. In May 2004, the Syrian government unilaterally ended intelligence cooperation with the U.S., therefore the details of this arrest remain unknown as do the specifics of other purported Syrian government efforts to curtail terrorism, including the findings of an internal investigation into the September 12, 2006 attack on the U.S. Embassy which resulted in the injuring of one locally employed guard, the death of a Syrian security officer who responded to the attack and the deaths of all four assailants.

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